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RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 7682
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 3211
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 0965
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ DEC 4641
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO PRIORITY 9380
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1619
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 1644
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/04/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PE](#)
SUBJECT: PERUVIANS WELCOME VENEZUELA REFERENDUM RESULTS AS
POSITIVE SIGN FOR DEMOCRACY

REF: A. LIMA 3720

[1](#)B. LIMA 3655

Classified By: POL/C ALEXIS LUDWIG FOR REASONS 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Peruvian contacts inside and outside the government have expressed surprise that the proposed constitutional reform package in Venezuela was rejected by voters, and some claim President Chavez was compelled to concede because the margin was actually wider than reported. Most Peruvians, including President Garcia, have welcomed the result as a positive step for democracy in Venezuela and the region. Analysts differ about whether the opposition's victory represents a turning point vice a temporary setback for Chavez's ambitions, and some suggest Chavez's democratic credibility might (ironically) be boosted by his defeat. Viewing Chavez through the Fujimori lens, many Peruvians remain deeply skeptical of the Bolivarian project. End Summary.

Referendum Outcome A Welcome Surprise

[1](#)2. (C) Our Peruvian interlocutors have generally expressed surprise at the rejection by Venezuelan voters of President Chavez's proposed package of constitutional reforms. Many had suspected that, whatever the indication of pre-referendum polls, the BRV government would do what was necessary to ensure victory (ref B). The prevailing view was that intensive government participation in the campaign, government-sponsored intimidation of "No" proponents and a suspect electronic voting system would all but ensure victory for "Yes". And if those things failed, there was always outright fraud.

[1](#)3. (C) Citing a well-informed analyst, one APRA insider claimed privately that the "no" vote may have won by a much wider margin than reported -- 60% to 40%-- and that the delay in announcing the result was due to Chavez's intention either to declare victory by sleight of hand or else to negotiate his way to a face-saving margin of loss. Some news reports noted a similar back-room dynamic, suggesting that the Venezuelan President's military advisors had finally prevailed upon him to concede defeat in order to prevent widespread and potentially violent protests.

Positive Sign for Democracy

¶4. (C) Whatever their earlier doubts, many Peruvian observers welcomed the victory of the "No" vote as a positive step for democracy in Venezuela and the region. President Garcia congratulated Chavez for "acting democratically" in conceding defeat, and added that "no personal power that perpetuates itself over a long period is positive... the Venezuelan people have shown that they want a democracy that allows for alternatives..." Prominent analyst and leader of the National Accord, Max Hernandez, told polcouns that Venezuelan voters had rejected Chavez's intention to remain in power permanently, which reflected the deepening well of democratic reserves in the region.

¶5. (U) Peru's media overwhelmingly reinforced this message. Television news programs showed celebrations of the "No" camp and covered the speeches of the student leaders most responsible for it. December 3 editions of most newspapers gave the results front-page coverage, featuring photos of a chagrined Chavez. Editorials broadly praised the vote as favoring democracy, and the prominent conservative daily El Comercio described it as a "democratic coup against a totalitarian project."

Democratic Turning Point...

¶6. (C) Opinion remains mixed, however, on whether the referendum result marks a turning point for President Chavez's mandate. One prominent analyst drew a direct comparison of Chavez's first loss ever at the polls with the waning days of President Fujimori's administration, when student groups, ex-Fujimoristas, and the President's ex-wife all joined together to topple an autocratic regime. If this referendum is not the turning point, then the turning point

may be swiftly approaching, he wrote; on the other hand, Fujimori was never buttressed by \$100 per barrel oil prices.

...Or Temporary Setback

¶7. (C) Other observers emphasize Chavez's statement that he has only lost "for now," pointing out that Chavez remains in power and is unlikely to give up on his ambition to remain President for life. Some even view his acceptance of the vote as a tactical retreat that ironically boosts his democratic credibility as he plots to undermine the election results by other means. One contact said Chavez had clearly learned the danger of rejecting the outcome of a popular vote from Fujimori's experience rigging his own re-election in 2000, which unleashed a broad and unified opposition. By accepting the results, Chavez has removed a potential unifying factor, leaving him free to develop a Plan B for reelection.

Comment: Chavez as Fujimori Plus

¶8. (C) Peruvians tend to view President Chavez's efforts to consolidate power through the lens of their experience during President Fujimori's government in the 1990s. A recent national poll indicates that 70 percent of Peruvians view Chavez as a dictator while 17 percent believe he is heading in that direction. Having suffered through an authoritarian experiment of their own, many Peruvians are inherently suspicious of Chavez's undemocratic maneuvering. End Comment.
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